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An Introduction to the Political Philosophy of Isocrates

Allan Bloom (excerpted and edited by Thomas L. Pangle)

We find Isocrates in a no-man's-land between rhetoric and philosophy: too philosophic for the politician, and too aware of the immediate and the changing for the philosopher. Isocrates' anomalous position is the consequence of the fact that when he is looked upon as an advocate of the same pursuits as Demosthenes, he is found wanting; and when he is measured against Plato, he appears trivial. Because he has eluded pigeonholing, his thought is almost never taken seriously anymore. It is possible, however, that his assignment to limbo is not the fault of Isocrates, but that it is our categories which are not quite appropriate. Perhaps there is some third pursuit which might comprehend the activities of such a man. Because Isocrates' end was to make man good rather than to implement this or that particular policy, his writings do not have that easily apprehensible character granted to those whose goals have a more immediate specificity and clarity. In the case of a man like Demosthenes it is possible to understand his policies in the light of the obvious ends of stemming Philip's tide and preserving a free Greece. The historical situation and his political role make the drift of Demosthenes clear and one looks for no theoretical subtleties in him. But Isocrates "stood outside of political life" (*Panegyricus* 171)[1] and attempted to change its whole course. The historical events of his time are not sufficient to define his end but only provide the special setting.

1. The City

The keystone inquiry is, what is a good regime (*politeia*) for Isocrates? He says in the *Panathenaicus* (132) that

> there are only three forms of regime (*politeiai*): oligarchy, democracy, and monarchy. Of those who live in any of these regimes, as many as are accustomed to establish in their magistracies and the leadership of affairs the most competent of the citizens, those who will best and most justly conduct their business—these will under all *politeiai* live well both among themselves and in relation to others. But those who use the boldest and basest citizens in their offices, those who will not in any way consider what is beneficial for the city but are ready to suffer anything for their own aggrandizement—the cities of these men will be governed in harmony with the villainy of their leaders. Those others who act like neither the first nor the second groups, but who, when they feel bold, honor those who speak for their favor; but who, when they are afraid, run to the best and wisest—such men will fare alternately badly and well.

There are, then, three sorts of regime, each admitting of two forms—one simple, and the other mixed with the rule of the best (aristocracy). The simple variety is characterized by the rule of private interests or the interest of class; the mixed form is notable for its public spirit, for men who care about the whole city. The aim of all good *politeiai* is to give the honors to such men and to see that justice is done the rest of the citizens.

To grasp more vividly what Isocrates implies when he distinguishes the two phases of a *politeia,* the public spirited and the corrupt, one need only watch him in action speaking about the history of the Athenian *politeia* to the Athenian populace (*demos*) in the assembly. He always sets the two extremes of political organization—the absolutely virtuous and the completely decadent—in an Athenian setting. The good regime is the democracy of Athens' heroic past; the bad, the democracy of Isocrates' own fourth century, where the better sort of men, simply because they are better, become subject to distrust. The demagogues fear them and realize that they are well understood by such people. The populace distrusts the gentlemen because the latter do not strive to please; the *demos* senses that the gentlemen are not in full accord with the regime (*Peace* 133; *Antidosis* 315–17). And this distrust is not totally unfounded, since in spite of their restraint, the gentlemen cannot but hope for a better regime; and at the same time, they recognize that they are personally endangered. In the *Antidosis* (101ff), Isocrates tells the story of his student Timotheus, the greatest general of fourth-century Athens. Timotheus was a paragon of all the gentlemanly virtues; he had won many notable victories, and had greatly improved the reputation of Athens among the Hellenes. But he possessed neither the capacity, nor did he have a desire, for the qualities of a popular democratic leader. The re-

sult was that he was convicted of malfeasance and received a tremendous fine:

> For while he was no anti-democrat nor a misanthrope, nor arrogant, nor possessed of any such vices, yet because of his high-mindedness—an advantage to generalship, but out of place in dealing with everyday affairs—he was held by everyone to have the faults mentioned. For he was by nature as inapt for the service of human beings as he was gifted for the management of affairs. And indeed he was often advised by me to the effect that those who are involved in political life and wish to be accepted . . . must not avoid considering and investigating how they will appear to be gracious and philanthropic in every way. . . . When he heard me speaking in this way, he would admit that I was correct; but he was not able to change his nature, since he was a gentleman, noble and good, worthy of the city and of Greece, but incapable of lowering himself to the level of people who were pained by their natural superiors. And so it was that the orators busied themselves in concocting many false accusations of him, and the multitude with drinking them in.

Isocrates tells us in this passage how aware he was of the need for flattery in political life: he was not ignorant after the fashion of Timotheus. It is in this way that we can understand Isocrates' own poetry or rhetoric, and it is easy to see why he always put so much emphasis on the importance of his own reputation. It does not mean that writing and reputation are in themselves the most needful things, but rather that when one acts or speaks in the sphere of politics, the element in which all meaningful action and the great bulk of thought takes place, these accoutrements are the heart of prudence. In other words, Isocrates himself stands as an example of the political precariousness of wisdom in these times. His summary of his life's work, the *Antidosis*, is in the form of a defense speech or "Apology" before the Athenian *demos*. It seems Isocrates thought that the most suitable way of telling about his own contributions was to make the exposition supposing a situation in which his life was in jeopardy. This in itself almost expresses his relation to Athens. But the relation is even more adequately expressed when Isocrates tells of the personal defects that kept him out of politics. He says several times that he did not have sufficient "daring" (*tolma*) for an active political career (*Philip* 81; *Panathenaicus* 10; *Epistles* 1.9 and 8.7). Daring is not a desirable characteristic in Isocrates' thought; it is a sign of lack of moderation (*Panegyricus* 77; *Antidosis* 89; cf. *Nicocles* 21). The Athenians demanded the sorts of leaders who had the nerve to adopt all sorts of schemes to maintain their power and to increase the affection

of the people (*Antidosis* 316–17). But in Isocrates' view even the best of these men, those who had a genius for clever manipulation and a sense of the expedient, like Pericles, injured the city. And the corruption resulting from their schemes set the stage for men like Hyperbolus and Cleophon and, finally, for the ultimate of daring—tyranny (*Peace* 37–38, 75, 111–13, 126). To allow men freedom before they have received the caution that Isocrates deems *the* political virtue is like giving a seven-year-old freedom, simply because freedom is a desirable thing (*Panathenaicus* 130–31; *Areopagiticus* 20). Every right implies its own responsibilities, and unless the responsibilities of political freedom can be met, the rights are not inherent either. The truly free man is the good citizen, not the man who can do anything he wishes.

It is in the past of Athens that Isocrates finds a regime that was good; and the very fact that it is past hints at one of its most characteristic features. The good regime is an ancestral regime: Isocrates indicates that the old is desirable simply because it is old (*Antidosis* 82). Adherence to law implies a respect for the lawgiver who was an ancestor. Therefore the ancestor must have been somehow better than present men, or else the ancestor's judgment would have no special title to preference. The ancestors must have been gods or sons of gods, for it is appropriate only for the best to have discovered the best ways of life (*Panathenaicus* 119–26, 204–6). Respect for the law and the community life means that a man must be pious. The citizens must in a sense regard themselves as "god's chosen people." The influx of foreigners must be forbidden because it sets up opposing ways of life and thus sows the seeds of conflict (*Peace* 89; *Antidosis* 171–72). The good *politeia* is essentially xenophobic and homogeneous.

The second great characteristic of the ancestral regime was its justice:

> What contributed most to their governing the city well was that, of the two recognized sorts of equality—the one that assigns the same honor to all, and that which assigns what is fitting to each—they were not ignorant of which was most useful. They rejected that which considers the good and the bad worthy of the same honors, since this is not just. They chose the equality which honors and punishes each according to his worth, and with this they governed the city, not filling the magistracies by lot from every one, but selecting the best and the most adequate for each of the tasks. For they expected that the rest would be such men as were the leaders of their affairs. (*Areopagiticus* 21–22)

A system of distributive justice, approving the proper qualities, is essential for the development of the proper leadership. The implication

is that all men are not created equal, that it would be an injustice not to give rewards to those who are objectively more deserving. Just as freedom necessarily requires some restraint, Isocrates says that the city is naturally stratified; and to assume that those who happen to be on top always belong there is to play ostrich. Anyone who today uses the expression "social justice" understands this. The appeal to "social justice" implies that the rights of men cannot be fulfilled within the somewhat limited modern political framework; its invocation is an attempt to rectify the obvious injustices which a laissez-faire conception of politics engenders. The elements today understood as factors in social welfare were as a matter of course included in Isocrates' analysis of politics. In Isocrates' scheme, this sort of justice is ensured by the existence of a leisure class:

> In a word, our ancestors decided that the *demos*, like a tyrant, should appoint its officers, punish those who erred, and judge in disputes. And those who had the leisure and possessed adequate means were to care for the commonwealth just as servants. Those who served justly were praised and were satisfied with this honor, while those who governed badly got no sympathy but met with the greatest punishments. And yet how could anyone find a more secure or juster democracy than this, which placed the most capable men in charge of its affairs and made the *demos* their master? (*Areopagiticus* 26–27)

The gentlemen's capacity for constant disinterested attention to affairs, and their innate caution, make them better servants of the city than is any other class. Insofar as the gentlemen make up the sovereign body, their character stamps itself on the whole city. The technical device by which their dominance is assured is a property qualification for the holders of office (*Areopagiticus* 26; *Panathenaicus* 145). The *demos* is willing to accept this because its members are kept busy by their own interests; and since there is no profit to be gained from office and the regime is directed to the common good, the *demos* is glad to have office held by others who are specially trained for it (*Panathenaicus* 145–47).

The third and last major characteristic of the ancestral regime was its moderation. In the olden times it was the Council of the Areopagus that was the chief means through which Athens attained to her eminence in the self-control that is the precondition of true freedom (*Areopagiticus* 37–48). This council was composed of the most moderate of the citizens, exercising a paternalistic care over the city. The Areopagus directed the young into occupations suitable to their means, even into philosophy; it punished wrong, and was ever watchful of potential wrongdoers (46–

50). It saw that habits, not laws, were the basis of good conduct, and attempted to set an example to all.

The question forces itself upon us: can *both* the ancestral regime and that of the fourth century really be called democracies? It is clear that Isocrates never deviates from this designation; but even the most naive of readers sees the broad differences involved in the regimes.

Isocrates was a rhetorician, and political rhetoric, in his eyes, was the instrument through which the thoughts of the man of knowledge and the intransigence of ordinary selfishness are mediated. Rhetoric as Isocrates conceives it has the purpose of persuading the unwise to accept the wise decision: that is, it implies something superadded to mere truth—if only a technique which makes the truth palatable. If the truth were a readily salable commodity there would be no need for writing subtle speeches in order to get one's point across. Isocrates goes so far as to suggest that it is not the discovery of the right course which is so difficult, it is getting other people to accept the right course (*To Nicocles* 41–47). Isocratic rhetoric is more than a technique of speech making; it is an understanding of men—their needs and their failings. It attempts to persuade men in the directions of their real needs but it is constructed with a full awareness of the phenomena of prejudice and selfishness.

Therefore Isocrates, in advocating the unpleasant truth that a root and branch change is necessary, has to put this truth in a way that would not make it appear such an extensive change. The word "democracy" is the sugar coating on the nasty medicine. He publishes by this technique the fact that one must speak to Athenians, or to any peoples like them, in this way. The innocuous fact that it is important to have good advisers is stressed. That the better men should be honored is often mentioned, but that their actually getting honors as a right implies a special sort of *politeia,* and that the real cause of all the trouble is the very people to whom he is speaking, are barely hinted at. All the good results are mentioned with the greatest of prolixity, but that a property qualification is required is only touched on twice.

The very clarity of the statement on the forms of *politeia* (*Panathenaicus* 131) is an indication of its rhetorical intent. It is intended to demonstrate that Isocrates is not interested in subverting democracy. Its intent can perhaps best be grasped when we consider the chief implication of Isocrates' assertion that aristocracy is not a regime. This would seem to say that aristocrats could consistently be democrats. The practical consequence of this is that Isocrates asserts, to those who would appreciate such sentiments, that a property qualification can be had without sacri-

ficing the democracy. It only requires putting together consistently his statements about the ancestral regime, to recognize that it was in fact a mixed regime.

To sum up Isocrates' conception of the ancestral regime, it was certainly a different *politeia* from that of the fourth century. It must be remembered, though, that it was not an oligarchy. It was a regime in which the people had a very basic role—that of election and audit. But it was balanced in such a way as to provide for more than just the mass interest. It left room for some reward according to merit and for the more disinterested rule of virtuous men. In this way it is very much akin to Aristotle's conception of *politeia*—that specific form which bears the generic name. And Isocrates' statement about aristocracy is not totally rhetorical in intent. He thought that it was possible to utilize each of the regimes in such a way that it would act as a support to the gentlemanly class. The major goal is, of course, the solid entrenchment of aristocrats; and the other factors are prudential considerations looking to this end. In addition, the aristocratic *politeiai* would resemble one another more than any of the others. In a sense, there are only two broad categories which are interesting to Isocrates, self-interested regimes and public-spirited regimes.

2. Pan-Hellenism

It is with a sigh of relief that the modern reader leaves the constraining atmosphere of Isocrates' reflections about the city—that city which made so many demands on its citizens and was so irrevocably rooted in the past—to turn to the glorious air of Isocrates' "ideal," the marshal trappings and pageantry of his pan-Hellenism. It is here at last that Isocrates urges the Greeks to do something, and something which can be done. He seems to forget that portion of his work which is so reminiscent of the post-Peloponnesian War melancholia, with its nostalgic yearning for the ordered and controllable past, the melancholia that is supposed to have so strongly marked his contemporaries, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. And it is on this base that he has established his repute as a practical man; he not only settled himself in an acceptably humble posture before the edicts of History, but he helped History along its inevitable course by divining, if not its inscrutable ends, at least the trend it was destined to follow. Isocrates wrote passionately throughout his long life of his ideas for a great new war against the Barbarians. He transcended the partisanship of a Demosthenes, and he appears to

have turned his back on the Platonic "ivory tower." He occupied himself with the most general interests of Greece and looked to the future of its civilization rather than to the preservation of any outmoded order. It has been said that he provided the ideology for Alexander.

The foregoing paragraph expresses, in sum, the first, and often abiding, impression that the thoughtful modern reader has after having read the great pan-Hellenic speeches of Isocrates. We moderns have a much more radically historical orientation than that of any epoch in the past and we are inclined to judge civilizations and men not so much in regard to their explicit claims about themselves or their own opinions about one another as in relation to the effects or results of their actions. We see them as unconscious actors in a great drama the denouement of which they are themselves unaware. And from such a bird's-eye vantage point Isocrates' pleas for Greek unity against the Barbarians take on overwhelming proportions. And yet, as attractive as this interpretation may be, it presupposes a complete alienation from Isocrates considered in himself. Isocrates is surely not equal to Alexander; there are evident differences between what Isocrates proposed and what Alexander did. The second major obstacle to the Isocrates-Alexander interpretation is the complexity of Isocrates' works. But, for all of this, modern interpretation has grasped something very important in its concentration on this theme. It is here that somehow rhetoric and action meet for Isocrates; it is on this project that he constantly vaunts himself and stakes his claim to renown. His speeches about this theme are his most polished. We are interested in pan-Hellenism because Isocrates wanted us to be. But why?

Isocrates makes no pretension that he comes forward with a new idea when he urges the Greeks to cease their internecine warfare, to unite, and to make war against the Barbarians. All to the contrary, he indicates that it is an idea which has already been discussed to the point of boredom (*Panegyricus* 15). It is one so obvious that it could hardly be overlooked by anyone. Here were the Greeks, the most vigorous and civilized nation that ever existed, wasting themselves away in a series of brutal and meaningless wars while confronting them was a corrupt and primitive empire which was naturally hostile to the Greeks, was the sole party to profit from Greek squabbles, and the conquest of which would have fulfilled the personal and territorial ambitions of the hostile parties within Greece.

It is within this framework that Isocrates' pan-Hellenic works take place. He devoted himself to the elaboration of a solution to the most pressing Greek problems. It is to be remarked that his attention was always more drawn to the question of the Greek union and its facilita-

tion than to that of the war itself. The great bulk of the speeches are filled with discussions of the appropriate leaders and means for the unification, and the Barbarians are rather left in the background. They are used as pretexts and incitements for the union and there is little real discussion of ways and means to be used against them. Isocrates always insists that the first step is to make the Greeks stop their wars and make common cause (*Panegyricus* 16).

Georges Mathieu (*Les Idées politiques d'Isocrate*, Paris, 1925) interpreted the great pan-Hellenic war as the fixed point in Isocrates' life work and saw the various alternatives Isocrates proposed as depending upon particular historical conditions that made each approach more or less feasible at a given moment. This view forgets just how important the *polis* is to Isocrates. The small, independent *polis* is the political unit which realizes man's fullest capacities. It is cut to human size. If it were much smaller it would be condemned to a rude primitiveness; and if it were much larger the citizen would be lost in a mass of men and become anonymous. In the great cities and nations men live like animals in herds; individuals have no chance to express themselves or be known to others by the exercise of a citizen's functions. The laws act at long distance and are rather preventive measures than institutions for the careful education of each discrete element of the body politic. The great masses of men live anarchically under tyrants. The *polis*, in the strictest sense of the term, was throughout his entire life *the* political standard for Isocrates. One cannot say that his opinions about this question changed with the shifting political winds of Greece. It is true that he spoke about this question more or less forcefully in different speeches, but this variation can be easily explained by the demands of the subject at hand in each instance.

The essentials of Isocrates' political preference for the *polis* are to be found in every speech he made; and one might even venture to say that it is the only element of his thought which never seems to change. There was no human object that seemed so dignified to him as a noble citizenry governing itself justly while maintaining its liberty and providing sufficiently for the needs of body and soul. Any national solution to the Greek problem would have been to discard the good with the bad, for it would have implied changing the basic structure of civic life. One can safely found oneself on the conviction that Isocrates always regarded something like the ancestral *politeia* of Athens, as he described it, the best possible political solution.

It thus seems rather curious that Isocrates spent so much of his time and his talent on his discussion of the pan-Hellenic union. One would

have expected him to pass his life in developing more fully the issues stated in the *Areopagiticus* rather than (seemingly) to set those issues aside in favor of ventures in an area that rendered precarious the very existence of the relics of that old order. It is in the resolution of this apparent contradiction that the true character of Isocrates' thought becomes clear. And one loses his way if he tries to ignore the question as does Mathieu by saying, for example, that a speech like the *Peace*, or the *Areopagiticus*, is made for the purpose of tightening up Athens' internal slack in preparation for the great war. In addition to the fact that there is not the slightest textual basis for this assertion, it ignores the great difference between these speeches and those on pan-Hellenism, a difference which Isocrates underlines by the very title of the *Peace* and his support of the Great King's treaty in it (*Peace* 16; cf. 24 and *Panegyricus* 120–21, 175–78). There is a tension which exists between these two categories of speeches, and it is simple justice to the text to attempt to see how Isocrates handles it and what he means by it before we assume that Isocrates was ignorant of it or before we attempt to explain it away by assigning dates to the speeches that would give Isocrates enough time to change his mind.

The foundation of a just *politeia* requires a certain material and moral plenty which, considering the ordinary scarcity of the human situation, is not to be found everywhere. Thus a good regime is not the natural right of every society but the result of the good fortune and hard labor of rare societies. Since just political order is a treasure not often won, it is something that must be protected from others; the ugly word xenophobia finds its justification in civil society (*Peace* 49–50; cf. *Panathenaicus* 176ff). Of course a humane city will attempt to share its good fortune with others, as did Athens when her order was established. She taught agriculture to the other Greek cities; she gave them a model for their laws; and, in a prefiguration of the suggestions of Isocrates, she led the superfluous population of the cities into the vastness of Asia, there to cut out sufficient lands for themselves. All these things generous men will do; but they cannot break the fine balance of their own regime for the good of others; that would be to injure themselves without helping the others. The most important element of any civic constitution is the *homonoia*—singleness of purpose—of all the citizens (*Peace* 19; *Areopagiticus* 31; *Panathenaicus* 178). All must agree on the common good and devote themselves to it; private interest must be swallowed up in the identification with the whole. This requires a suppression of overriding class issues, and an agreement on the fundamentals of justice which is the fruit of generations. This requires an uncommon virtue and modera-

tion. And it requires the homogeneity of the population. All of this is evidently established on the most tenuous of bases; and the possible sources of change are innumerable. The ancestral *politeia* did fall in spite of its strengths, and Isocrates sees the source of the destruction in matters of what we would today call foreign policy.

Athens reached the pinnacle of her glory in nobly defending the Greeks. But in the very act she created an internal revolution. At Salamis the Athenians turned from the use of their traditional land army to that of a fleet. This choice was necessitated by the event. The decision of Themistocles to embark on the boats and leave the land was unquestionably a brilliant tactical move and was the central cause of the Greek victory. But in so doing, the Athenians overturned the balance of power in their own city. Previously the wars had all been fought on land using the citizen troops who had the wherewithal to provide themselves with a suit of armor. This meant that only a rather limited segment of the population could become soldiers—those with money and enough discipline and courage to face hand-to-hand combat. Land armies were the preserve of the middle class and when wars only used such troops the regime could be safely founded on such a moderate base. Now the need was for men who could row boats. The questions of education, money, or even virtue no longer entered the picture. The men most willing to do this and most easy to find were from the poor and even foreigners.

No matter how isolated a nation may be, there is always the strong possibility that some enemy will come to the attack using techniques that are unknown to it. If the society is to defend itself, it must change its ways to the extent that will allow it to meet the challenge. Sometimes it loses in its defense that which it set out to defend.

In the fifth and fourth centuries the size and power of the Greek cities were such that they were all under one another's influence and could not avoid the type of defensive adjustment of which we have been speaking. The Isocratic response to the new situation, to the situation that made his best political order impossible, is the pan-Hellenism. He did not react as many moderns would have done; he did not see a destiny which was leading men on to a new order of things which had not been conceived in the past. He did not put his faith in the historical process. He taught that human nature does not change and that the best political order conforming to that nature remains always the same. When a city is necessarily born to change itself, that does not make the change good. Just as primitivism is a defective but often necessary stage, so are bigness and overcivilization defective. The only hope is to find, on the level of the defective stage, some path which can lead back toward the healthy order of the past.

Now, leaving aside all the variations in expression, addressee, and rhetorical trapping, a careful reading of the pan-Hellenic speeches will show that their goal was always such a rehabilitation. The idea was to unite the Greeks around an issue that would require a common action and a cessation of the petty hostilities (*Philip* 9–10; *Panegyricus* 15; *Panathenaicus* 15). This required a goal which offered enough real gain to attract the imagination and energies of the Greeks. Such a pretext could be found in the great traditional enemies of the Greeks, the Barbarians, who waxed so fat with land and gold (*Panegyricus* 173–74, 179–86). Such a campaign would draw a large group of those who had little to keep them at home into the armies in the hopes of gain, thus emptying the cities of their most irresponsible citizen element (in his descriptions of the ancient activities of Athens, Isocrates states most clearly the purposes of his pan-Hellenism and its dispositions for the poor: see esp. *Panathenaicus* 164–66). And the same function would be served in the establishing of colonies on the lands that were to be won. The mercenary armies that roamed Greece at the service of the highest bidder would also be swallowed in the great cause (*Letters* 9. 9–10; *Panegyricus* 167–68; *Philip* 96, 120–21). Hence the Greek cities would find their enervated spirits rekindled and the moderate classes could regain the elements of their influence. This is the hard core of the plan in the service of which Isocrates uses so many eloquent wiles. Contained therein is absolutely no plea for a Greek national state, none for the spreading of Greek culture to the East.

3. Athens and Sparta

The deeper meaning of Isocrates' Hellenism and hence his pan-Hellenism becomes clearer from a consideration of the classic antinomy between Athens and Sparta. Isocrates treats the subject cautiously because he is a citizen of Athens, and simple prudence leads him to state his views very carefully. Accordingly, the *Panathenaicus* purports to be a praise of Athens and a criticism of Sparta. However, the reader will experience some difficulty in finding the praise of Athens. The Lacedaemonians are indeed viciously attacked. The speech begins with a long discussion of Isocrates and his beliefs. He then turns to the praise of Athens and recounts her *very* ancient good deeds, deeds which are so ancient that they lie beyond the range of historical recollection, and are therefore, strictly speaking, mythic. When Isocrates turns to historically verifiable stories, the technique used is that of a comparison and contrast

between Sparta and Athens, and this, the largest body of the speech, is given over to proving that Athens had done less evil than Lacedaemon. Isocrates turns to the question of domestic or internal politics only with reluctance: he assumes that other people, the defenders of Sparta, will insist on raising this topic, so he too must broach it. He makes no attempt to defend the existing Athenian *politeia* but instead praises the ancestral *politeia.* But in this account the ancestral *politeia* was created by the mythic Theseus and ended in the times of the historical Solon and Pisistratus (in the *Areopagiticus,* it was Solon who was its creator). Isocrates admits that these are exactly the same institutions as those actually used by the Spartans—although he denies that it was Lycurgus who invented them; Lycurgus only copied the old Athenian institutions. The practical effect of this admission is evident: Sparta has a good *politeia,* Athens does not. Up to this point we have seen that Athens and Sparta both do evil to their neighbors, and Sparta has gotten more out of it because she has maintained her internal equilibrium and has the best institutions. The conclusion would seem to follow that Sparta is decisively superior to Athens. And on a strictly political level this is true; but the issue is not as simple as that. The real praise of Athens is that she is the mother of the arts, that it is in Athens that philosophy found her home. As Isocrates says to the Athenians in his great defense speech (*Antidosis* 293–94),

> For you, yourselves, are preeminent and superior to the rest of the world, not in your application to the business of war, nor because you govern yourselves best or most preserve the laws handed down to you by your ancestors, but in those qualities by which the nature of man rises above the other animals, and the race of the Hellenes above the Barbarians, namely that you have been better educated than others in wisdom and *logoi.*

It is important to note that these two solutions to the question of the good human society are mutually contradictory. The good old city rests on ancestral traditions that are unchangeable and that existed before the founding of philosophy, while philosophy depends on constant newness, change, and progress: "we praise the oldest laws and the newest of *logoi*" (*Antidosis* 82). Tradition is authoritative and implies a submission of the individual to the past of the whole community; it is founded on common agreement and does not admit of questioning by reason. Lycurgus set down laws for Sparta, and all succeeding generations looked to his institutions as to divine truths. Philosophy, on the other hand, knows no authority and accepts no tradition as given. Although Theseus

may have constructed the *politeia* in his deeds, it was only Isocrates who understood it in his words and could give an account of it in *logoi.* The early, simple times lacked a reasonable understanding of justice; and it required the experience of man and his corruption to develop philosophy. It required Athens with her tormented history to arrive at Isocrates. And the defense of Athens and the story of her original justice are, after all, creations of Isocrates.

It is in the curious dialogue at the end of the *Panathenaicus* that Isocrates makes apparent his intention to awaken, through his epideictic rhetoric especially, an awareness in some of his readers of the tension between the two poles of Hellenism. After the speech has been read, all the students, save one, applaud with approval, as does the audience at epideictic recitals. They are pleased by the myth which glorifies their city and, by association, them. They enjoy the aesthetic qualities of the work and are, as it were, enchanted by it. But one student is led to reflect on the speech and makes some relatively profound remarks about it. Isocrates thus indicates that the response to this sort of oration is dual: it pleases the many and makes a few thoughtful. The distinction is the commonsense one between those who accept the myth and those who ask questions—the almost inevitable distinction between the ordinary and the intelligent. The former are gratified by the myth; the latter are led to find out what is inadequate about the myth. Such eternally are the roots of philosophy. The student says that Isocrates called the students together to hear the speech because he wanted to test them, to see whether they remembered what they had learned in their association with him and whether they were true to philosophy. The students had learned how to judge types of speeches and Isocrates wanted to know if they continued to do so. Isocrates, says the student, chose in his prudence to please the Athenians but at the same time to retain in one way or another the dignity of the Lacedaemonian way of life—to present the truth about both ways of life:

> Seeking such an effect, you easily found speeches of double meaning and provocative of dispute—the sort which, when they are used in cases about contracts and unfair gains, are shameful and no small token of depravity, but which, when they are employed in dialogue about the nature of man and things, are noble and philosophic. (*Panathenaicus* 240–41)

4. Eros

To plumb the full dimensions of what is represented by and in Athens, we must take note of the fact that in this his very last speech, Isocrates

refers his readers back (*Panathenaicus* 126) to what he had written regarding Theseus in his early epideictic oration in praise of Helen. Theseus's establishment of a good political order was the result of his moderation; he would have otherwise made himself tyrant contrary to the principles of the just. But at the same time he was a man susceptible to the attractions of beauty, and, in the truly overwhelming case of Helen, his moderation was for nought. It is not a question of the absoluteness of morality, but only one concerning the case in which morality as usually understood can be *rightfully* transgressed; in the case of tyranny such transgression would have been base, but in that of Helen it was indicative of nobility. Theseus's passion for the beautiful and pleasant was very intense; in the case of the city he controlled it and was enabled to be a good ruler, but he did indulge it at the right time. There is no place where Isocrates so clearly identifies himself with and absolves conduct which is in contradiction with the civic virtues—thus showing that such virtues are not exhaustive of the human potentiality.

One can imagine two sorts of life, that of the moral man devoted to the occupations of the city, and that of the man who lives for his pleasure. Isocrates in principle identifies the truly pleasurable with the moral and thus resolves any problem that might seem to be involved. It is not, however, always strictly evident that the satisfaction of human desires reasonably conceived is the same as the politically moral. Theseus's love for Helen is a practical example of this—and perhaps Socrates' love for philosophy is another. Isocrates in the *Helen* gives his preference to erotic passion and seems to prefer it to moderation. The work takes the view of the private man and shows that Helen is worth more than any other goal.

As a result of this choice, Isocrates is forced to defend Paris and his conduct, a relatively difficult task inasmuch as the latter represents traditionally the archetype of the sensual coward. But, Isocrates argues, if his conduct is understood as that of a man who appreciated that Helen was the highest of goods, then it would be hard to regard it as contemptible; he was simply acting for the realization of the most desirable of goals. Paris was chosen by the gods to judge a contest over beauty, so that he must have been among the wisest of mortals; he chose beauty because that was what the gods themselves fought about. The political consequences of his acts and the hostile judgments of those who fought him should not influence us in our understanding of the merits of this man. Hence Paris, whose life from a political point of view was despicable, finds himself with one stroke cleared of his ill-repute; it is enough that he was a shrewd judge of beauty. The moral distinctions pale in the light of this characteristic.

Paris's judgment was seconded by the suffrages of the Greeks, the Barbarians, and the gods. For the sake of Helen they all made a war like no other that has ever come to pass. They were overcome by *eros* for labors on her behalf; the gods were willing to let their favorite sons die rather than not participate in this war, and the Greeks and Barbarians were not willing to leave off until it was decided who was to possess her. For they were not fighting for the sakes of Paris and Menelaus but for Asia versus Europe. They knew that in whatever land Helen resided happiness would reign. And they were not fooled in this respect, since Greece, after its victory, knew its ascendance over the Barbarian nations. If one recalls the main emphasis of Isocrates' distinction between Greek and Barbarian, one can begin to understand the meaning of Helen. It was philosophy that made the Greeks excel. In the *Panathenaicus* the Trojan war was carried on for Helen in word only but in deed for the whole of Greece. In the *Helen* this notion is expanded and it is shown that the good for which the whole of Greece fought was beauty, that they were under the spell of a sort of erotic passion the fulfillment of which led to Greece's flowering. The cause and the end of the war were then indeed "Helen" if she is properly understood. Otherwise this struggle would have been fought in the shadows of senselessness and would have left no mark on the future. The pan-Hellenism of Isocrates is a capturing of the beautiful on the level of action, an understanding of how the beautiful can be brought into reality within the realm of politics. This does not mean to say that a pan-Hellenic war would be the most valid or the most effective way to appreciate the beautiful; but such a war does gain its significance from this motivation on the part of its authors. This accounts finally for the difference in tone between the pan-Hellenic speeches and those on the city. The former are illumined by the transcendent light of *eros*. Isocrates' political action is a political modification of his desire for the beautiful. The city is not strictly amenable to such desire, and requires the addition of moderation, but Theseus, the legislator, must have been under the influence of the spell to inform his legislation with that higher flame.

It is when we approach the third level of Isocrates' interests, his art, that we see a more direct approach to what Helen represents:

> For she participated to the highest degree in beauty, which is the most august, honorable, and divine of the things that are. It is easy to recognize beauty's power; for, of the things which do not participate in courage, wisdom, or justice, many will appear to be honored more than each of these, but we shall find that nothing unendowed with beauty satisfies us and that

> we despise everything except insofar as it shares in this form (*idea*). Virtue itself is esteemed mostly because it is the most beautiful of practices. One can appreciate how much beauty excels over all the other beings from the way we are disposed in regard to each of them. For we want only so much of other things as we have need of, and we trouble our souls no further with them. But *eros* for beautiful things arises in us, so much stronger than our will as the object is itself great. And, while we envy those distinguished for understanding or anything else unless they attract us by daily benefit and thus force us to love them, as soon as we see those who are beautiful we are well disposed toward them. Not only do we tirelessly pay them court like gods, but we find it more agreeable to be their slaves than to rule over others; we feel more gratitude to those who enjoin much than to those requesting nothing. While we reproach all those who are dominated by any other force and call them flatterers, we consider those enslaved by beauty to be lovers of the beautiful and industrious. We use so much piety and forethought in regard to this *idea* that we dishonor more the beautiful persons who sell themselves or permit themselves to be seduced than those who violate the bodies of others. And those who protect the flower of their youth, making of it as it were a temple not to be entered by the base, we honor for future time just as those who do some good for the whole city.
>
> And what need is there to waste time discussing human opinions when Zeus, master of everything, manifests his power in all other things but deems it right to abase himself when he approaches beauty. For, likening himself to Amphitryon he came to Alkmene, as a Shower of gold he joined himself to Danae, and becoming a Swan he escaped into the bosom of Nemesis, and again under the same form he slept with Leda. He always hunts this nature with art rather than force. (*Helen* 54–60)

The beautiful is the most important of all things and the virtues are only desirable insofar as they participate in this *idea.* There are some things which have nothing to do with the virtues but are more highly regarded than they because of their beauty. It is a long road that Isocrates travels from the *Demonicus,* where the virtues are all that is of any worth, to the *Helen* where they are admired, along with other things, because they are beautiful.

There seem to be two ways of looking at virtue in Isocrates. The first is from the social point of view; man is a social animal and to live in common with his fellows there are certain traits he must possess, such as courage and justice. If man's end is truly identical with the end of political man, then the virtues are natural parts of a man just as is his body. You can no more imagine a political man as desirable, whose morality is defective, than a physical man as desirable whose body is defective. The second point of view seems to start from a private or personal

interpretation. One could not imagine a decent human being who was a cut-throat, an irretrievable debaucher, or so cowardly that he would not defend his children. Such a conception of man shocks our sentiments as well as it would render such a being incapable of any thought or action. The very fact of living implies a certain amount of character, and to live well requires a great deal. These two different approaches to morality lead essentially to the same consequences; the virtues are praised and encouraged. This is not quite sufficient, however, to overcome the conflict between the two. Since the end of the personal viewpoint is beauty, and Helen was beauty incarnate, the rules of justice and temperance were subordinated to her possession. The morality of the city is much sterner and bears no exception; in it the duty to one's neighbor comes before the right to one's own satisfaction. In the questions that are the most vexed the two moralities are likely to give divergent answers. They seem to arise from separate spheres of human potentiality, the one belonging to the political man, the other to the erotic man. But the two are not easily separable. In particular instances the city can be understood completely without the erotic man's point of view; however, the morality of the city most often, and in its most convincing instances, appears as a protection of the collective egotism of its citizens; it rules over others unjustly. The consequence of its laws seems to be constant war among men, and virtue seems to be military virtue. An attempt to work out political morality simply on the basis of the preservation of the social order would mutilate man to such an extent that he would be nothing but a soldier—as Sparta proved. The city must make an appeal to other principles in order to make itself really compatible with man. It must introduce beauty into its system, as was done by Busiris with the philosophers (see the *Busiris*). The city cannot do without the beautiful; otherwise it would not be choiceworthy. But, at the same time, the erotic man would in all probability refuse the restraints which are necessary to civic life or at least chafe under them. He desires pleasure, and the city has admitted its own defectiveness in needing him. There will be a constant tug-of-war between the liberated passions and the rigors of political life. One has the choice of remaining at the level of Sparta, which means a sort of brutishness, or the introduction of a perpetual tension and malaise in the city. The nature of man seems to be obstinately dual, arising out of its capacity for the life of action and its capacity for the appreciation of the beautiful and all that it entails. But they are mutually dependent, the city unable to be human without some *eros* and the erotic man unable to live without the city and the intercourse with his brethren. If one were to attempt to reduce the beautiful

to the civic, the beautiful would become political propaganda in the spirit of "no subtleties for me, but what the city most needs"; and if the political were simply subordinated to the passion for the beautiful, it would justify tyranny in the spirit of Callicles. Hence the two are necessary to one another but at perpetual war. There are momentary balances between the two as expressed in the political activity of Isocrates. A city which establishes a sort of cultured virtuous class as its rulers approaches a standard which would diminish the intensity of the conflict, especially if the legislator were a man who appreciated the beautiful. And a pan-Hellenic war for the rectification of Greece's cities and learning satisfies the need for political virtue and the fulfillment of passion. But these are all more or less adequate compromises. In the *Helen* Isocrates opts for mad passion as the only complete life.

The argument of the *Helen* leads to the conclusion that Isocrates did indeed leave open one claim against the city and did regard it as possible that the best life is not that of the good citizen. The man who contemplates the beautiful and can re-create it in his art is at least as worthy. The self-interested sexual passion which is so powerful in men is the source of this passing out of the city because the good city does not recognize the right of private sentiment. This source, however, is shown to have an end that is no longer personal and that proves that eros, which seems so gratuitous, is only the subterranean longing for the eternal. To forget this divine urge would be not only to leave man unsatisfied but would also deprive the city of its ultimate purpose; the city would be entirely cut off from the eternal, as the pre-Socratics said it was; preservation would be its end and Sparta its type; the only satisfaction of *eros* would be tyranny. The real difference between "Greek" and "Barbarian" is one of humanity understood as requiring the presence of philosophy, and without this distinctive difference the battle between them, and pan-Hellenism, lose their higher significance.

The breadth and humanity of the pan-Hellenic speeches of Isocrates are designed to appeal to the motivations which lead to great political actions and beyond—to the study of philosophy. The campaign against the Barbarians was only secondary. It was one good suggestion among others made by a nonpolitical man who accepted for a moment the postulates of politics. But Isocrates' overriding goal was the attempt to keep alive in his school Greek culture, and, for this purpose, the attraction of some to philosophy and the development in others of a right opinion about his teaching. This is the true pan-Hellenism—the defense of civilization, and of its fragile and essentially contradictory political context, against barbarism. As he says in concluding his great speech

pleading for an Athenian policy of peace and confederacy among the Greeks (*Peace* 145):

> And though many noble things remain to be said about the subject, the length of this speech and the number of my years counsel me to cease speaking now. But those who are younger and more in their prime I urge and I exhort to speak and to write such things as will turn the greatest cities, those accustomed to do harm to others, toward virtue and justice, because when Greece fares well it happens also that the affairs of the philosophers proceed much better.

Notes

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1. All references to texts of Isocrates are to the standard section numbers.